When the South Seas Native Came to America

Many Tourists Have Written What They Think of the Romantic Islands; Mr. Hall Tells Us What the Islanders Think of Us

By JAMES NORMAN HALL.

IN these days, when many curious travelers to the South Seas return with yet more curious information about their experiences among the islands, it seems no more than fair that the Polynesians be given a hearing with respect to their own travels in America. For they are not all stay at homes.

Occasionally one of these brown skinned wanderers is to be found whose longing to see with his own eyes the wonders of the white man's civilization has carried him as far as San Francisco. They rarely go further than that, for to them "Frisco" is America itself—the land from which come all the little luxuries of life—tinned beef, flour, Bibles, kerosene oil, perfume and corrugated iron.

It was at San Francisco, where I was the guest of my friend Appleby, that I first heard of one of these voyagers, a youth named Roaki, from the far off atolls of the Low Archipelago. I had just returned from a year spent among the islands of that group, and Appleby was greatly disappointed when I told him that I had not met the young Paumotuan.

"I'm sorry," he said, "for I should like to know what he thinks now of a visit he made to San Francisco last year. He came here on one of our cargo boats which had put in at Papeete for water. I don't know what he was doing at Papeete, but in so far as I could learn he had been there only a few days when our vessel called and he signed on as a member of the crew.

"He hailed from an island—Ro—Rao—some such name, and I believe this was the first time he had ever left it. I met him on the wharf on the day of his arrival and he looked so lost and lonely that I decided to take charge of him until I could get him a passage back to the islands.

"My reason for doing this was not wholly unselfish, however. Here, it seemed to me, was a chance in a thousand to learn what a primitive man of good native intelligence thought of the ways of the civilized world. Of course I couldn't know what he thought, for I understood nothing of his language and he had picked up only a few words of English.

"Well, I did my utmost. He lived at my house. He went with us to the theater and out to the country club; he even looked on at several little dances there. He rode in trains, on elevators, in street cars. He saw everything I could think of to show him, and, by Jove! he didn't seem to be in the least impressed!

"You might have thought he had been born and brought up in San Francisco. How do you account for this? My own belief is that he accepted our marvels without wonder because they were so foreign to anything in his experience. There was nothing in his own life with which to compare what he saw here. Nevertheless, I would like to know what he really thought about his visit, and what he told his family when he went back home."

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It was my good fortune later to gather some information on this point. I had occasion to make another voyage through the Low Archipelago and as I carried with me some presents for Roaki from Appleby and his family I decided to give them to him myself if the chance came. I traveled for several months on small trading schooners which were picking up copra and pearl shell. I made sojourns at various atolls and at last was able to take passage on a forty ton schooner which was bound for Roaki's island.

One could call it an island only by courtesy. The lagoon is fifteen miles long by nine broad, but it is surrounded for the most part by barren reef, with here and there a tiny islet covered with scrub, giving root to a few isolated cocoanut palms. The habitable land is a mere strip along the western side of the lagoon, several miles in length, but scarcely 300 yards across at any point. The village lay opposite the break in the reef, where the boat passage is, and here the schooner came to anchor, close in shore, within a few yards of Roaki's home.

I can imagine from the warmth of the welcome given me as a friend of Appleby the reception he himself would have had at Raeo. "Apati" they called him, this being the nearest approach they could make to the English pronunciation. The forty inhabitants of the place knew him by name and they would have known him by sight as well, for his photograph, which had been framed in polished pearl shell, hung on a wall over Roaki's bed.

Beneath it was a picture postcard of Market street in San Francisco, the scene of many of Roaki's adventures. A family feast was given on the evening of my arrival and not until it was over and the rest of the village had assembled at his house did Roaki, in the deliberate Paumotuan way, ask for news of his American friends.

"Apati-Tane (Appleby the man); was he well?" I assured him that he was and that he often spoke of his friend Roaki. "And Apati-Vahine (Appleby the woman); he too was enjoying good health?"

"She too, I said, had every reason to be grateful for abundant good health.

"And the Mamma-Ruau, with the removable teeth, and Mari, the daughter, and the two small children?" Roaki remembered them all in turn, including the household pets, a dog, a pony and a canary.

I was a little puzzled at first at some of his inquiries. Whom did he mean by Appleby's Mamma-Ruau, literally, the old mamma or grandmother? The explanation that she had removable teeth did not enlighten me, but when he said that she prepared the food for the family I understood that he referred to Carrie, the Swedish cook. And Mary, the housemaid, he had mistaken for Appleby's oldest daughter, and Emma, the children's nurse, for Mrs. Appleby herself.

The real Mrs. Appleby and an older daughter of 15 he had not identified as belonging to the immediate family. "Fetiis" he called them, or visiting relatives, thinking evidently that women of such ample leisure could be nothing else. I didn't take the trouble to explain, for I was curious to learn of some of his other impressions.

He had not been unobservant. Appleby was entirely wrong about that. He talked from 7 in the evening until long after midnight, all the village listening, commenting, conjecturing as they must have done scores of times before. I regret exceedingly that I can but briefly summarize the story, and that the scene at the telling of it and Roaki's manner of narration must all come from the imagination of the reader.

It must be remembered that Raeo is as far removed from our world as it is possible for an island to be, and that of the people who live there only Roaki had ever wandered beyond the charmed circle of the islands themselves.

"I shall never forget," he began, "the kindness of Apati to me, a stranger on his island, and if one day he should come to Raeo I shall kill all my pigs and chickens for the feast of welcome to him. But I am poor like the others here and the most I could offer would be nothing to the food I have eaten as his guest.

"One thing I saw clearly in America; without money one may not eat, but all have money there, so it matters not, and Apati is very rich. We ate when and where we would and never less than three times a day, but where this food came from and who it is that must work to furnish it I was not able to see.

"How is it that Apati has such great wealth, for he did not work? The sun was three hours high before he arose from sleep. All of his family are very lazy except the Mamma-Ruau and Mari the daughter, who came from sleep an hour after the dawn. It was Mari, the daughter, who showed me the room where one bathes in a large dish.

"Here I had but to turn a piece of polished iron and water came, fresh water, but I could not tell from what source. There is no lack of fresh water in America. The rainfall must be heavier with you than it is with us. But I was sorry for Apati and his family, who must always bathe in a dish and cannot rise from their mats in the cool of the early morning and swim far out in a lagoon such as we have.

"Daily I waited long for Apati to awake, but never was this time wearisome to me. I watched Mari, who went from room to room with the singing brooms. This strange instrument groaned faintly, and as the daughter moved it over the soft mats which covered the floor, if there were bits of paper or other rubbish there, after it had passed over them these were gone.

"Several times I threw small objects in its path and always they disappeared. That it was a broom I have no doubt, although I could never understand so strange a thing. I wish that you would explain it to my mother, for she says I but tell a tale to make sport of her. Brooms do not sing, she says, neither does the dust of the floor disappear by enchantment.

"Neither will my mother believe that in America much of the food is cooked at little stoves of beautiful silver which stand on the table where one eats and that fire without smoke is made in them by only pushing a little button."

At this point Roaki begged me very earnestly for confirmation, so that I tried to explain to his mother the nature of electric coffee percolators, egg poachers, bread toasters, &c. She listened very courteously and then asked:

"Where does this fire come from?"

"Through wires," I said, "from a great house where it is made ready for many houses all over the village of Frisco."

"You see?" said Roaki. "She believes you no more than she does me. Sometimes I wish that I had not gone to America, for my people only smile when I tell them of these things. It would have been better had I never spoken of them."

Poor Roaki! I did what I could to bear him out, but it was to little purpose, for I had to explain by making comparisons with things known to them, and this was difficult.

"Even my father doubts," he went on, "when I tell him of the great buildings which are nothing but houses in layers one above the other, to a height ten times greater than that of our tallest cocoanut trees. I have told him—how many times!—that one rides from house to house in a little car along a passage which is like a street standing on end. I show him the picture of these houses and yet he doubts that such things can be.

"No matter. We who have seen them know that it is true. Apati took me each morning to one of these houses far above others. Why he went there I do not know, but he sat for an hour or two in a beautiful room talking with friends and reading many letters from those who were far away, perhaps.

"In one corner of this room there was an object under a glass globe more curious by far than the singing broom. It made a sound like the clocks which the traders sell us, and a ribbon of paper, covered with numbers, came from the globe and fell into a basket. Sometimes Apati rose from his chair and looked at the ribbon, which moved always out of the globe into the basket.

"He tried to explain this to me, he said, 'Tika, Roaki.' At last I understood. He meant to say 'Tiki,' which, as you know, in our language means one of the old heathen gods which were worshiped before the coming of the white missionaries. And yet this is strange, for the missionaries tell us that you have but one god. Are there others then which we know nothing about?"

I hope I may be forgiven by the missionaries, but the question was fired at me so unexpectedly that I was forced to admit to Roaki the existence of other gods in America. And how could I have explained to him the nature and the functions of a ticker, that indispensable piece of equipment in a modern business office? I assured him, however, that his friend Apati was a Christian and only very rarely fell from grace and worshiped the "Tika"; and he was always sorry for it afterward.

"I know that he is a Christian," he said, "for there are many Bibles in his house. In one room there was nothing but Bibles, shelf after shelf of them from floor to ceiling. These were in many different covers, and some had pictures of the saints, and of wicked men and women of whom we read in the Scriptures.

"While Apati talked with his friends in the pleasant room," he continued, "I looked out of the windows into other rooms, which were opposite to the one where we were, for this great building was hollow in the center, with the layers of houses on all four sides of it. In one of these I saw men who came to be shaved or to have their hair cut with the scissors. There were beautifully dressed women in this house, who held the hands of the men while they were being shaved.

"At first I thought that men with family troubles came here seeking new wives, but soon I saw the women were trimming the fingernails of the men and rubbing them with cloths. Sometimes three people were busy to make beautiful the man in the long chair; one to shave him, the woman to trim his fingernails and yet another man who rubbed his shoes with brushes. These men, I knew, must be the highest chiefs of your island, but why is it that their fingernails must be cut by women?

"Toward the middle of the day Apati and I rode back to the earth in the little car. Then we went into the streets and walked far, looking at this and that. Always my mind was filled with wonder at the things I saw, but alas! I could ask nothing of Apati, for he understood nothing of my language.

"Once we passed a great store with tables in the street in front of the windows. Here were many things to eat and among them I saw cocoanuts. I had not tasted a cocoanut in many weeks and I gladly took three, and when I turned to go with Apati he had disappeared. I hurried on to find him, but a man standing by the table rushed after me and grasped my arm so that I dropped the nuts in the street.

"The man seemed angry and spoke in a loud voice. I told him that I did not speak the American tongue. I picked up the nuts and would have gone on, but he seized my arm again. Then I saw Apati, who was coming back to find me. He laughed and gave the man money for the nuts, and with this he was pleased and brought me a paper bag to carry them in.

"It was at this time that I understood how in America one must give money for everything. I was surprised that on so large an island where there is so much food one must pay even for three cocoanuts.

"Apati gave money for everything. The money I have seen him give in one day would buy flour for my family for a year and the kerosene oil for my lamps and the cloth for my pareus. I did not know the value of your money and watched closely to see if I could understand.

"Alas! I could not. Apati often gave little for a great service and much for a small one. We rode far in the cars which go in the streets and for this he gave but two little pieces of money. Sometimes at midday we ate in place where hundreds of people came. Here a beautiful woman hung our hats on hooks near the door—and for this service Apati gave a large piece of silver. But if it was a man who placed our hats on the hooks it was not necessary to give so much. Why was this?

"We had food at many different places at the noontime when we were in the middle of the village far from Apati's home. But three times we ate at the houses of his friends. It would have been better had we gone there often, for we ate as much as we would and paid nothing.

"But I will tell you something which puzzled me very much and to this day I do not understand it. I had long been wishing for a feed of raw fish, for you know how much better they are when eaten alive, freshly from the sea. Often at Apati's home we had fish, but always cooked ones and my stomach ached for the uncooked flesh.

"One evening I went with Apati to the house of his friends and here at last I was content to see that fish were to be eaten raw. On a table there was a large glass bowl filled with water, where little fish of a golden color were swimming about. These were like the little soft boned ones which we find in our lagoons and I was eager for the dishes of salt water to be brought that we might eat.

"I waited long, but the others were not so hungry, and so at last I asked Apati if I might have a fish. He was talking with his friends, but nodded his head and smiled. So I ate one and found it very good, although the water in the bowl was not sea water, but fresh. Then because there were many fish—more than enough for all—I took another and was eating it with pleasure when a woman screamed and another made a great outcry.

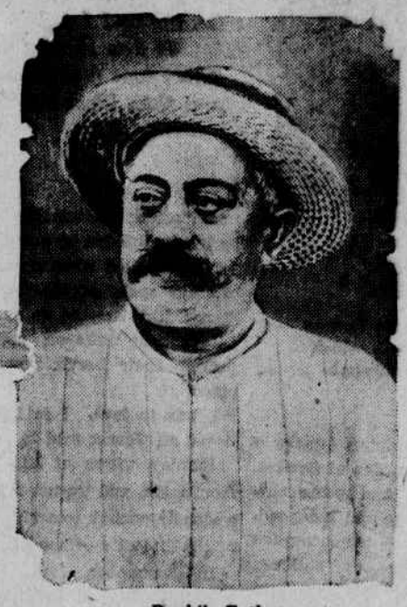
"I thought they had been taken with a sudden sickness, or that perhaps they had seen the spirits of the dead such as often trouble my mother. But no. I saw that the women were frightened of me, and I knew I had done something wrong. I do not yet understand what it was. Should I have eaten but one fish? Or should I have waited until the others first had eaten? I will be glad, my friend, if you will explain this, for I do not understand, your customs are strange to me."

I did explain. I told him and the other islanders the uses of goldfish in America, and they thought it the funniest thing they had ever heard of. What! Fishes as pets, ornaments? They couldn't believe it.

I wish there were space enough to tell all of Roaki's story; what he thought of our dances, for example, and what he believed a game of golf was and a dozen other things. But I have at least told enough of it, I believe, to verify the old saying that "One-half of the world doesn't know how the other half lives."

"Watching for a ship and its tourist visitors from America."

Above is James Norman Hall



Women of Roaki's Island.

Roaki's Father.

Queer Denizens of Africa's Mysterious Jungles

AFRICA is the "mystery" continent. It is there that the most curious and unlikely animals and human beings may be found—from real giants, two of whom can kill and eat an elephant, to two toed monkey men, who live in treetops. From the "eppo," a species of antelope that climbs trees, to the hippo horse, half hippopotamus and half horse that is a survival of a species of gigantic monster, the fossil remains of which are dug up in North America.

In central Africa, as in the great valley of the Amazon and the hinterlands of the Guianas up in the northeast of South America, there is in the dense roof of the lofty jungle overhead another world, unknown, unseen and forever far out of the reach of puny man, a world about which we know very little, for it is populated by a host of creatures that never come down to earth.

The African natives tell strange and gruesome stories about some of these living things. For instance, they declare there is an animal, something of the leopard kind but striped like a zebra, that cannot face the daylight, so used it is to the twilight overhead. Selous, the great hunter and explorer, saw an apron made of its skin, which was wholly unlike any skin even he had ever seen. This animal is particularly fierce and agile, attacks the natives from behind and then, having bitten them at the back of the neck, sucks their brains out as the weasel does the blood of a rabbit.

In the same part of unknown Africa a race of tree beings are said to exist, who live in the tops of the trees and are sheltered from enemies by the dense foliage. These folk, two toed and claw handed, pass from tree to tree with the ease and activity of monkeys, and are of a particularly ferocious nature. Then there are dwarfs in central Africa which live like wild animals among the rocks and bushes. Their projecting jaws and protruding lips, slender, ill shaped legs and protruding bellies give them the true apelike appearance. They are singularly timid and fleet at the sight of strangers.

As mysterious is the race of gigantic natives in the unknown deserts north of Uaso Nyiro and the Lorian Swamp, East Africa. This strange race is known by tradition to the natives now inhabiting the land west of the Juba in the north and the Tana in the south. Their name appears to be "the Maanthinie," and tradition has it they are Christians and originally came from Abyssinia.

Until pestilence and native wars broke them they are said to have cultivated large areas, used irrigation to raise crops, owned camels and lived in great circular houses, the huge stones of which testify to their strength. Their hoes, it has been stated, were so large and strong that a local native of the present day could not lift one. Two of this giant race could not only kill an elephant with spears but eat it up afterward.

Just as the data regarding these giants cannot be denied, neither can data concerning the hippo horse be cast aside merely because they refer to what appears to be a survivor of prehistoric ages.

A short time ago the press was announcing that an explorer in Africa had been put to flight by a weird and formidable animal such as we come across in a nightmare or a dream. The fugitive stated his strange enemy must have had a body more than twenty feet long and of great girth, an upright tusk on its nose and with the fore parts of a horse and the hind parts of a cow.

An explorer, H. E. Lee, first encountered it, though the natives have always spoken of its existence. He was creeping into position for a shot at a hippopotamus when he saw in the background of the pool, slowly and meditatively chewing water weed, the strangest animal yet known. On its nose it carried two very sharp pointed horns or tusks, not curved but sticking up straight. The front of its head had all the appearance of a hippo, but the cheeks and ears and mouth were like those of a horse. It had a mane of red hair, and while its upper body was that of the hippo, yet the legs and feet were those of the horse. Its neck was not short and thick like a hippo's, but gracefully arched and elongated like that of the horse. Its tail, long and bushy, was covered with red hairs.

Lee shot this amazing animal and found it measured over twenty-one feet in length, with a girth of eighteen feet. Skeletons of a creature of similar build have been unearthed in America.